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Language Diversity, Policy, and Practice in Eritrea

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Introduction

In a multilingual society, the language issue is of paramount importance because language use and language policy directly affect the daily lives of the language's speakers. Yet, in Africa the issue has not received much attention and is hardly articulated and debated on the grounds that it is not as urgent as other social and economic issues. Language does not seem to belong to the priorities in a continent ravaged by numerous other social and political problems. Eritrea is not an exception in this regard. Although language issues predated the armed struggle era, language policy and planning in Eritrea only began to gain greater public interest from August 1996, when the 'First National Conference on Eritrean Languages' was held in Asmara (PFDJ, 1996). Controversies surrounding the language issue varied in both perspective and implications, and at times failed to produce a common understanding due to the lack of a common ground for discussion. The conceptualisation and description of the language situation and its public evaluation and discussion lacked the precision required by the complexity of the subject. While some viewed the language policy of independent Eritrea from its instrumental function for national integration and post-independent nation-building, others were concerned with its social, economic and political ramifications. While still some want to look at it from the individual child's interest, others would be more concerned with its implication to minority ethnic group rights.

Against this background this article aims at outlining the conceptual and theoretical framework that we used in investigating language diversity, policy and practice in multilingual, post-independent Eritrea. The article will present a critical view of language, of how that view influences the way we study language, and of how it shapes our understanding language policy. It will not go into detailed descriptions or analyses of empirical findings from our field research, nor draw general conclusions in this respect (see, however, Hailemariam, Kroon and Walters, 1999; Hailemariam, 2002).

In general, one of the main factors influencing language policy decisions and their linguistic and social outcomes is that these decisions are often complicated by local political concerns. Equally problematic, therefore, is investigating the connection between a concrete language policy and its practical results. Language planning, as a relatively young scholarly discipline, may not yet be capable of offering magic formulas to language planners or politicians as a panacea for all language problems, especially in the case of multilingual societies on which only limited empirical research has been done. The discipline does, however, suggest frameworks within which variables for the analysis of language planning can be studied. Such frameworks are more analytical tools than fixed guidelines for solving language policy problems. Within these frameworks we were able to conduct our investigation. Its theoretical approach was grounded in sociolinguistics, including

both quantitative and qualitative data collection, with a particular focus on how institutional processes and ideologies in language use, language policy and language education were translated into classroom practice.

Views about language

One of the issues that obscure the definition of language policy and planning relates to how we conceive language, since that will in some way determine how we study and analyse it. When language is seen only from a structural perspective, merely a code, our understanding of language policy will be restricted to understanding texts. But language is more than just a code; it is first and foremost a form of social behaviour.

It is important for educational policy makers to be aware not only how current institutional arrangements and processes concern the children in the classroom, but also how these fit into the overall language policy of the state. Accordingly, language policy and choice of language(s) of instruction need to take into account not only what is useful for the child psychologically and linguistically but also what concerns the political and economic structures of the state. Baker (1996), following Ruiz (1984), considers three perspectives that influence language planning: *language as a resource*, *languages as a problem* and *language as a right*. The multilingual language policies and practices of post-independence Eritrea illustrate these orientations.

Seeing language planning as a solution to language problems is not necessarily wrong, but it deflects attention from the underlying motivations of language policy and planning (Cooper, 1989). Ultimately, language policy and planning are directed toward non-linguistic ends, such as socio-economic development, modernisation or national integration (Mesthrie *et al.*, 2000). From this perspective, language planning as policy and as decision making should consider social, economic, and political contexts in which groups with unequal power and resources contend with one another. Language should be viewed not only as a resource, but also as an instrument of social (in)equality. In this light, it is useful to view language via critical frameworks in order to examine how language, power, and state ideology are connected (Fairclough, 1989), or how global inequalities and world languages such as English are related (Phillipson, 1992).

Once it has been recognised that language is more social than individual practice, the relationship between social structure and language structure and their influence on each other can be better understood. The term 'discourse' has been found appropriate to the linguistic and social dimensions of language use. Linguistically speaking, it refers to language structure beyond the sentence level. It may also suggest the production of a written or oral text by one or more language user(s). Socially, discourse refers to interpersonal verbal interaction as well as societal level dialogue and debate.

Language both shapes and is shaped by socio-political realities (Sarangi and Baynham, 1995). Viewing language use as social practice implies that it is a socially situated mode of action in a dialectical relationship with other facets of life (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995). This means that the relationship between discourse or language practice and social structure is not a one-way but a two-way relationship. It is, therefore, important that the critical study of language explores the tension

between these two sides of language use. Consequently the main research focus in our study was to establish links between macro-level policy decisions on the one hand and the everyday, sociolinguistic reality in multilingual Eritrea on the other, especially in the school as a main social institution that shows the interface of the different facets of language use.

Multilingualism and language policy

Multilingualism is a result of languages in contact and as such a universal phenomenon. Language policy in a multilingual society in large part involves the management of diversity. If all citizens spoke the same language in a state, there would be no problems of language choice and hardly any language policy issues (Fasold, 1984). In post-independent plural societies, however, one of the prominent issues in nation-building is the nature of national communication networks. The need for citizens within the boundaries of a modern state, and particularly for the citizens of a multilingual state, to create a horizontal communication network is a national imperative. More generally speaking, languages in contact or language diversity is associated with language problems. Multilingualism is conceived as a factor constricting the possibilities and needs for citizens of a state to communicate with each other; hence, solving language diversity problems is one of the main goals of language policy and language planning (Grin, 1998:141). It doesn't, however, follow that language policy and planning is all about finding solutions to language problems. In a multilingual situation, the connection between language diversity and language policy should be clearly articulated. The process of language policy formulation is shaped by views about language diversity, which in turn are associated with basic assumptions about language. Multilingual states which have acknowledged their diversity are confronted with difficult decisions about their linguistic and cultural diversity and about how to maintain a fair balance between unity and diversity.

In the development of language policy, the fact-finding phase is expected to give basic necessary information on a multilingual state's sociolinguistic profile (Daoust, 1997; Mesthrie *et al.*, 2000). A sociolinguistic survey can provide information not only about the connections between language policy and language practice but also about the connection between rhetoric and practice. Our study showed some of the ways language diversity, language policy and language practice are related to each other. In our study, a sociolinguistic survey was conducted to examine language use among 359 children in nine ethnolinguistic communities from five regions in Eritrea. Multilingualism was found to be a salient feature of the Eritrean linguistic landscape. Most of the children in the study reported speaking the mother tongue and at least one other language at home. Almost half of the respondents claimed knowledge of a third language. In the areas where a single ethnic group dominates and the vernacular language of that region is also the medium of instruction at the school, multilingualism took on different forms. For example, in the remote rural school in Melebso where Tigre is the mother-tongue medium of instruction, over half of the children reported Arabic to be their second most frequently used language. In contrast, in the Saho medium school in Igila, despite a homogeneous ethnic composition and mother-tongue medium of instruction, Saho-Tigrigna bilingualism was more prevalent.

These findings from our sociolinguistic survey, supported by classroom ethnographic data, are different from the knowledge one gets from the macro perspective as presented by the policy planner. The image of diversity known to the language planner could be at variance with the way the sociolinguist presents it. In the same vein, what may be declared in rhetoric and what actually happens in practice may not always be equivalent. One must also consider the micro dynamics of language practice as reflected in the individual language repertoires, the fluidity and variety of which are expressed in daily interaction. More generally, the African sociolinguist should examine the links between the micro and macro, rhetoric and practice, top-down and bottom-up aspects of the language policy of a state in the process of its construction.

Conceptual and analytical paradigms in language policy

Contemporary critical sociolinguistics has developed an analytical framework for research into language use from the standpoint of the speaker's benefit. According to the language-as-a-resource paradigm, language is viewed not only as a means to acquire resources, but also as an instrument of social (in)equality. This view emphasises the importance of conceptualising the role of language as a means to resources through educational institutions. This argument follows the belief that the ability of individuals to master the dominant local (or world) language is a key to genuine participation in the local (or global) economic and political systems. Language in other words is a gatekeeper that filters upward social mobility. For Corson (1993) the institution of education is very important in this regard as it allocates power to favoured norms of discourse and thereby creates discrimination and injustice for many. The extent to which English functions as a gatekeeper to upward social mobility is pointed out by Pennycook (1995:40) who argues: "With English taking up such an important position in many educational systems around the world, it has become one of the most powerful means of inclusion into or exclusion from further education, employment, or social positions."

Motivated by this more pragmatic view of language some linguistic communities of Eritrean society are taken in by the power and appeal of this paradigm rather than by the linguistic rights paradigm, which advocates mother-tongue medium programmes. In a broad sense, the division between these two paradigms and perspectives, i.e. language-as-a-resource and language-as-a-right, seems to be especially pronounced in our research with regards to language values and preferences. Although this may not be at a conscious level and may not fit a rigid categorisation, it can be said that the awareness of these perspectives raises two seemingly opposing concerns: parents whose primary concern is the 'the child's survival' (i.e. parents who are mainly interested in their children's ability to acquire the linguistic repertoire in order to survive in the national system) on one hand, and parents whose primary concern is 'the language's survival' (i.e. parents who are mainly interested in the maintenance of their native language as a marker of cultural identity) on the other hand. Although our investigation showed a clear indeterminacy and overlap as regards the conceptualisation of language policy goals on the part of the linguistic communities involved, there still could still be a middle ground where both the child and the language could be saved.

The requirement that each school child learns at least two Eritrean languages, with either Tigrigna or Arabic being compulsory, in addition to English, is a clear case of multilingual education, which is entirely congruent with a language-as-a-resource orientation promoting linguistic pluralism for the individual's survival within the national system as well as for the nation as a whole. The transitional model also reveals a language-as-a-problem perspective, grounded in the linguistic discontinuity hypothesis where language is seen as a problem blocking effective participation of school children in the learning process. Both the switch from mother-tongue instruction in primary school to English at the secondary level and the teaching of Arabic and Tigrigna as 'subjects of instruction' give bilingualism a clearly transitional flavour. This transitional orientation may be somewhat mitigated by the multilingual nature of Eritrean society and by the fact that English is a foreign, rather than a second language for most of the Eritrean population.

The language-as-a-right perspective is more focused inside minority communities, in some sense positioned between national aspects of the language-as-a-resource perspective and child-centered aspects of the language-as-a-problem orientation. Provision for 'mother-tongue education' represents a language-as-a-right perspective (see e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson and Rannut, 1995). In our research, the Kunama ethnolinguistic group was the one that the language-as-a-right perspective appealed most to. It could be described as a case of an ethnic group in the quest of assuring the continuity of its cultural identity through the educational system (Hailemariam, 2002). The language-as-a-right perspective has greatly shaped the discourse on mother-tongue education. According to this orientation, groups and individuals are entitled to the use of the language of their choice. One of the main reasons for the controversy over the use or non-use of mother-tongue education emanates from lack of a clear articulation of goals and the means towards these goals on the part of policymakers and from a lack of insight in how these goals are understood by the people affected by them.

In the communities studied, the primary reason given by parents for preference of mother-tongue education programmes was based on the language-as-a-right perspective. Those who welcome the programmes and want the status quo to continue see the mother tongue as a symbol of cultural identity. The fact that mother-tongue education is associated with recognition of language rights may be related to an insufficient understanding of institutional arrangements and processes. This is reflected in the parents' lack of knowledge whether the specific school offers languages other than the mother tongue (Tigrigna, Arabic and English), whether it offers the language as a medium of instruction or a subject etc. More specifically, whether the home language is studied as a *school subject* (and the policy is seen as limited support for the mother tongue) or whether the home language is used as a *medium of instruction* (and the policy is seen as promoting linguistic rights across the curriculum) remains a problem due to the overlapping nature of the different orientations and their views about language. In our study of Eritrean language policy, the preference for high status languages (Arabic and English) expressed by the children in the study, were echoed in the interview with their parents. These preferences indicated future aspirations rather than present reality.

Language policy goals, orientations and ideologies

The goals of language policy decisions at a macro level and the means towards these goals require consideration of the specific socio-political historical context in which they occur. Often linguistic diversity is considered a reality that poses a dilemma, or even a threat, to a state in the process of post-independent nation-building. Language diversity differs from country to country, depending on the political orientation towards state building. In the same vein, approaches to the study of language policy and planning differ due to differences in policy orientations and perceptions about the role of language in those orientations.

Generally speaking, institutionalised language policies are intended to influence existing language behaviour. In its broadest sense, language planning can be defined as “deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes” (Cooper, 1989:45). Given the multidimensional view of language, the study of language policy and planning can provide diverse analyses, depending on the kinds of language ideologies adopted. It is too simplistic to talk in terms of dichotomous classifications, such as assimilationist versus pluralist ideologies. According to Akinnaso (1991), language planning decisions in developing nations derive from one or more overlapping ideologies: linguistic pluralism, linguistic assimilation, vernacularization and internationalisation. Kroon and Vallen (1997:206) discuss assimilation, integration and pluralism as main policy positions. And, according to Ridge (1999:103): “Language policies in Africa may have any of four rationales. They may derive from or continue colonial policies through elite self-interest, or commitment to globalisation and modernisation. They may have their roots in pan-Africanist or pan-Arabist vision. They may seek to do justice to ethnic variety. Or they may be driven by national pride or exigencies of nationalist politics.”

Although it is not possible to simply pigeonhole Eritrea’s language policy into any of these ideologies, it is important to try to identify and disentangle these ideologies and orientations. First and foremost, Eritrea’s commitment to pluralism seems fundamental. Post-independent Eritrea does not accord official status to any of the country’s languages, but rather allocates certain roles to certain languages within the state of Eritrea. While Tigrigna and Arabic are the two working languages, all languages are entitled to serve as media of instruction in the primary schools. Across the country, six different languages (in the year 1999: Afar, Arabic, Kunama, Saho, Tigrigna, and Tigre) serve as media of instruction. Moreover, the essence of Eritrea’s language policy is its recognition of multilingualism and its decision to deal with the complexities of linguistic diversity. The present government, aware of the problems of other multilingual nations, seems committed to ensuring equality of nationalities, and considers equality a right that is to be secured through public policy.

Educational language policy in post-independent Eritrea

Educational policy reflects a country’s political options and goals, its traditions, values, and visions, and it exists in the context of a particular socio-political order. The language policy and planning of Eritrea were developed by a decision-making process in which the Government of Eritrea, the successor of the Eritrean Popular

Liberation Front, sits at the top of an organisational chart and implements language policy decisions through its agent, the Ministry of Education.

The chief document in which the basic principles and assumptions about language policy in education are articulated is the *Declaration of Policies on Education in Eritrea by the Provisional Government*, which was issued on October 2, 1991, the same year that Eritrea became independent (Department of Education, 1991). This document, in linking pedagogical ideologies and institutional arrangements, specifies what language practices in the educational setting could be expected to exist. Reading through the lines, the document indicates the views underpinning the ways in which educational programmes and structures are organised. It begins by underscoring the primary function of language as a communicative resource. This is a relatively narrow approach to language. A more sociolinguistic approach would take into account a wider range of social functions, language as a resource for educational, economic and political benefits. This approach also considers language as social practice, consisting of norms for social behaviour, in the home, in the classroom, and on the playground. It might be useful to consider language from a broader perspective, as a means to resources and power and as an instrument of social (in)equality.

At the core of Eritrea's language policy is a provision that entitles all children of school age to be educated in their mother tongue. This policy is motivated by the principle of linguistic equality which guarantees the basic linguistic rights of each of the country's ethnolinguistic groups. It also provides for educational programmes which view the mother tongue as the best medium for conveying curriculum content. These programmes are motivated more by psychological and pedagogical concerns than by socio-economic ones. Although not stated explicitly, Eritrean educational language policy including a requirement to learn either Tigrigna or Arabic at the primary school level, suggests the endeavours on the part of the state towards bridging the existing 'linguistic gap' at a societal level. The teaching of both Tigrigna and Arabic as school subjects is apparently motivated by nation-building and national unity concerns, although this too is not expressly stated - as in the case of Nigeria, where school children have to learn one of the three major national languages Hausa, Yoruba, or Igbo (Akinraso, 1991:38; Oladejo, 1991:256). The main ramifications of these provisions indicate that Eritrean language policy gives due respect to the existence of multilingualism and that multilingualism is regarded as an important issue at the individual as well as societal level.

In keeping with egalitarian practices carried over from the pre-independence period, the Ministry of Education of the Government of Eritrea seeks to implement macro-level national objectives of education policy in the school system in a rather centralised and highly structured manner. Against this background, the government bases its policy on multilingual and multicultural considerations in developing its programmes in the schools. With mother-tongue education at the centre, the policy is based essentially on a pluralist approach to education. The goal is preservation of minority languages and enhancement of multilingualism in the state of Eritrea.

From the government's point of view, educational institutions are important in shaping a collective Eritrean identity, anchored in the culture and experience of the Eritrean people. In this light, language policy figures as a major regulatory factor in easing tensions and controversies generated in the state's attempt to balance between two competing commitments: national unity and ethnolinguistic diversity. Although nation building is not necessarily a function of language policy decisions,

the connections between language, nation and political community offer insights into political processes. Similarly, language use and language policy can shed light on the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism in Eritrea. The sociolinguistic survey we conducted indicated that ethnicity was not as sensitive an issue as some people would think (as in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa where it is not talked about openly). Language use and language policy offered a relatively neutral way of getting at certain aspects of this seemingly sensitive issue. By examining home language use, attitudes to mother-tongue instruction, and languages of high status, we were able to ascertain that identification by ethnic origin did not conflict with the core principle of linguistic pluralism adopted by the Government of Eritrea, which has committed itself to promoting 'unity in diversity' by guaranteeing the linguistic rights of each ethnic group.

Outlook

Two macro-factors contributing to language policy decisions in post-independent African states are colonial legacy and language diversity (Bamgbose, 1991). In most cases the colonial languages continue to enjoy official status. World languages or languages of higher status continue to be the languages that serve functions of wider national communication and post-independence nation-building. The rationale for the choice of colonial languages at the expense of indigenous languages lies in their neutrality with respect to ethnolinguistic relations inside the African states. The Eritrean case is an example of a Sub-Saharan, multilingual African state's language policy which cut off its colonial legacy. It has not fallen to the 'trap of its past', as some Pan-Africanists would describe it (Asmara Declaration, 2000). This is partially because none of the successive colonial experiences (Italian, British, Ethiopian) were able to hand down a linguistic tradition strong enough to leave behind a lasting linguistic culture. But also the literary heritage of two main languages (Tigrigna and Arabic) the long struggle for national liberation and self-assertion of national identity, and the symbolic function the Eritrean language must have played their role.

This policy has its roots in the armed struggle and follows a rather egalitarian approach towards diversity. Although no single ideological foundation underlies the policy, it stresses the multilingual reality of the country and derives from a fundamental belief in linguistic pluralism. No single document, questionnaire, or interview revealed this policy explicitly. Taken together, however, we were able to flesh out some of the complexity from the way the discourse was constructed in policy documents, interviews with education officers, teachers and parents, and classroom discourse. We are convinced, however, that more in-depth and international-comparative language policy studies, focusing on a variety of cases, such as communities, families, classrooms, and educational and governmental agencies, could lead to a deeper understanding of what a language policy promoting 'unity in diversity' really means.

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